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SUBJECT: HIGHWAYMEN CLASH WITH POLICE IN SOUTHERN SERBIA, ONE DEAD

¶1. (sbu) Summary: A spate of recent shootings in the Presevo valley have led to knee-jerk conspiracy theories among local analysts and media. While the incidents themselves are clearly not political, they do tend to highlight the fragility of the security situation in the valley as the Kosovo status process drags out. End summary.

¶2. (u) On the evening of August 4, a group of masked and armed men were stopping and robbing passenger vehicles on the Bujanovac-Konculj-Gnjilane road in the Presevo Valley near the ABL with Kosovo. Reportedly, three masked men in black unmarked uniforms, armed with an automatic weapons and RPGs, supported with at least seven more people in the surrounding hills, stopped six vehicles by shooting their front tires and stole an unspecified amount of money and jewelry from passengers. One vehicle managed to escape and to alert local police. The police, in an unmarked civilian vehicle, arrived at the crime scene and were immediately engaged by the assailants. Outgunned, police requested assistance of the Gendarmerie that soon arrived, repulsed the attack and killed one of the assailants, identified as 22 year-old Enver Dalipi from Konculj village. The shooting continued for an hour before the gang escaped from the scene.

¶3. (u) Most of the local Albanian political parties condemned the incident. Jonuz Musliu, Deputy Mayor of Bujanovac, who happened to be in one of the attacked vehicles, confirmed that his car had been attacked and that the motivation was undoubtedly robbery but could not identify the assailants. Riza Halimi, Albanian MP in the Serbian Parliament, condemned the attack and demanded that local police identify the perpetrators as soon as possible. Halimi also used the incident to call for the reduction of security forces in the region and said that the incident should not be used as justification for increasing the police and Gendarmerie presence in the region. Saip Kamberi, President of the Bujanovac Council for Human Rights told us that the event will definitely be manipulated by both government and local Albanian politicians for political gain, since none of the previous incidents from past summers have been resolved.

¶4. (u) Roadside robberies like this are sadly common during the summer in the Presevo valley. The "Konculj Gang", mostly composed of former members of the demilitarized Liberation Army of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja (UCPMB), perpetrates these robberies almost every year during the summer holidays when "guest workers", predominantly ethnic Albanians, from western European countries travel via Bujanovac to Kosovo. The worst incident occurred in 2004, when bandits killed a local Albanian woman when her husband tried to run away from their roadside blockade. Serbian police have so far been unable to identify the gang leaders and stop the activity.

¶5. (u) The police's inability to arrest the highwaymen has, unsurprisingly, inspired a number of conspiracy theories. Tabloids are printing ungrounded, sensationalistic articles with the headlines: "It Started", "Albanians Ready for War", "New War in Southern Serbia," while some analysts believe that the attack of an armed ethnic Albanian group has political motivations. They claim

that the attack was deliberately not a "typical terrorist attack" which might weaken the position of the Albanian negotiators in Kosovo but rather conducted by extremists to "send a message" to Belgrade and the international community.

¶ 6. (u) In unrelated incidents, two more shootings occurred on August 7 in the region. Two men were shot and killed in what police and local OSCE officials call a family dispute in Presevo, while a "business-related" fatality occurred earlier in the day in Bujanovac.

¶ 7. (sbu) Comment: We are convinced that these attacks are simple robberies which are an unfortunately common occurrence during summer vacation months and, ironically, primarily target other Albanians. While the incident itself is not cause for alarm, though, the memories of the 2001 armed conflict in southern Serbia between UCPMB militants and the Serbian forces are still fresh and strong, and the fragile stability in the ethnically sensitive region remains tenuous. The drawn-out Kosovo status situation only heightens these tensions and contributes to the strategic ambiguity in the region, which allows for criminal elements like the Konculj gang to thrive for years, and for the Serbian police to risk inflaming passions through even routine duties. End Comment.

SIMMONS